

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The man of God: Elisha

Last week we considered Elijah, one of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament. As we continue our consideration this morning of people known as men of God, we shall look at the life of Elisha, a man very different to Elijah, but no less committed. These two lives were inextricably linked, and indeed it is of them together that we first read of Elisha, in 1 Kings 19:19-21. "So he departed from there, and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was ploughing with twelve yoke of oxen before him, and he was with the twelfth. Then Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle on him. And he left the oxen and ran after Elijah, and said, "Please let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you." And he said to him, "Go back again, for what I have done to you?" So Elisha turned back from him, and took a yoke of oxen and slaughtered them and boiled their flesh, using the oxen's equipment, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he arose and followed Elijah, and served him."

In many ways, Elisha reminds us of the Lord Jesus. Indeed the meaning of his name, "saviour", the son of Shaphat, "a judge", suggests as much. His life, as we shall see, was full of gracious compassion for those around him. Here, at his calling to service, we see him busy in the home environment, in much the same way that we read that Jesus learnt the carpenter's trade at home. He evidently came from a rich family. Not everyone had twelve yoke of oxen. But even at this early stage of his life, we see promising signs of the man he was to become. For where is he? At the back, the dustiest, humblest place. It is onto this scene that the fiery Elijah walks and throws his cloak around Elisha. W Phillip Keller has written, "This was no pantomime performance. Elijah and Elisha were not playing games. This was a call for keeps. This was a commissioning under divine command. This was to move from the civilian ranks, into a combat regiment for God." Appreciating the enormity of the call to service, Elisha sacrifices the oxen, his past life, and prepares to follow Elijah. He has burnt his bridges; there was to be no going back. There needs to be a similar focus in our lives if we are to achieve great things for God. Time and again, the Israelites looked back to their life in Egypt, and complained. They had lost their focus entirely. When Jesus said, "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me", He was calling us to forsake forever the life of self pleasing, and to wholeheartedly commit ourselves to working for His glory. Elisha appreciated this, and would never go back from following Elijah and his God. In 2 Kings 3:11, we further read that Elisha had poured water on the hands of Elijah. In learning to be a man of God, Elisha would humble himself, and take the place of a servant. It is all too easy to look for the glamorous aspects of Christian service. We need to start by adopting the servant mentality, and learn to do the most menial tasks to hand.

This then was the man whom God called. But before he could become the man of God he would be, he had to take one final journey with Elijah. They leave Gilgal, which means 'wheel' behind. Life had been going round in a quiet way. Now all that was to change. They come to Bethel, meaning the 'house of God', but Elisha wouldn't stay here either. Sometimes we long for the ease that Christian company brings, but God would have His servants out on the battlefield. Next they journey on to Jericho, a 'fragrant place'. This journey of thirty-five miles or so across rough wilderness must have been exhausting. How tempting it must have been for Elisha to stay at Jericho and find refreshment for a weary body. But nearly 10 years with Elijah had not left Elisha untouched, and so they journey on. Beyond the Jordan, Elisha sees his mentor miraculously taken into heaven, but he is left behind, alone. Would he crack, become downhearted? No, Elisha journeys on to Carmel, a 'fruitful place'. There must have been a tremendous solace for Elisha, lonely but not alone, as he revisited the site of Elijah's famous victory over the prophets of Baal. He spiritually feeds himself before finishing his journey at Samaria. It is vital if we are to be of use to the Lord Jesus that we feed ourselves spiritually by reading His word and quietly spending time in His company. Now in Samaria Elisha was ready to become a true man of God. Here he would watch (Samaria means 'watch') over Israel for the next 45 years, looking for ways in which he could best lead the people into a deeper knowledge of God.

Let us now look at seven people who recognized Elisha as a man of God.

Elisha and the widow's oil. (2 Kings 4:1-7)

Elisha was approached by a widow whose two sons were soon to be sold into slavery, as she had nothing else to pay back her debts. So Elisha tells her to gather together as many pots as she can. This she does, borrowing empty jars from her neighbours, until she can find no more. From her own jar she starts to pour oil into the empty jars, until,

miraculously, they are all full. So Elisha tells her to go and sell the oil, pay her debts, and then she and her sons can live on the rest. So we see that the man of God brings freedom from slavery.

As Christians, we live in a world that is in slavery. Slaves to sin, to alcohol, to drugs, to money, and many other things. Jesus could say "If the Son shall set you free, you shall be free indeed." We know the One who has the power to bring freedom. Are we ready to share that knowledge with those that we come into contact with, our neighbours, colleagues, and friends?

Elisha and the Shunammite woman (2 Kings 4:8-37).

At the opposite end of the social spectrum, Elisha deals with a woman of note from Shunem. She persuades her husband to build a small upper room on the house for the use of Elisha, as she recognizes him as a "holy man of God". In return for her kindness, Elisha inquires if there is anything that he could do for her. He is told that she has no child of her own. Led by God, Elisha tells her that within the year, God would give her the son she so wanted. In time the boy is born, and with time grows. But then tragedy strikes this home, the boy dies. The Shunammite woman goes to find Elisha, and in deep distress catches hold of him, unwilling to let him go. Elisha returns with the woman to find the dead boy in his room. What follows is truly wonderful. We read that Elisha prayed to the Lord, and then stretched himself out on the boy, who revives. If we stretch ourselves we become bigger. Elisha stretched himself, and became smaller! If God is to work through us, we need to get smaller. As John the Baptist could declare, "He must increase, but I must decrease". So we learn that the man of God has no confidence in himself, but great confidence in God. Paul could say, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me". Jesus could say, "without Me you can do nothing". If God is to use me in my day then it can only be to the extent that I make myself nothing, allowing Him full control of my life.

Elisha and the pot of stew (2 Kings 4:38-41).

Elisha returns to Gilgal, and there finds the sons of the prophets. He intends to spend some time with them and so a meal is prepared. But one of the young men put something bad into the pot, and the stew is ruined. Their response, "O man of God, there is death in the pot!" sounds a little like my son after I have cooked tea! What would Elisha do? Would he, too, pull a face and waste the food! No, he adds some flour to the pot, and the stew is made good. Often in the Bible, flour represents the perfect life of the Lord Jesus. So, in picture form, the man of God brings the perfections of the Lord Jesus and feeds the sons of the prophets with these. As I meet with my fellow believers, I wonder if it can be said that I reveal anything of the perfection of Jesus to them? Do my words and my actions in any way reflect His perfection? During the week I need to have considered the wonderful person of the Lord Jesus if I am going to be able to share Him with others.

Elisha and Naaman (2 Kings 5).

Time does not allow us this morning to consider in any depth this wonderful story. However, we learn that the man of God is used to bring new life to Naaman the leper. I guess if so famous a person was to come and visit me, I would have been out there like a shot, autograph book in hand! Naaman was an important man, and he was full of his own importance. And yet Elisha is not ready to pander to that pride. He tells Naaman to perform some menial act, to wash in the dirty river Jordan, not even bothering to meet him face to face. However, once Naaman finally obeys Elisha, and is cured, Elisha does talk face to face with Naaman. By now though, Naaman realises the greatness of God, and consequently his own lack of importance. Elisha's God becomes Naaman's God also, and Elisha does all that he can to help Naaman spiritually. What a lesson for us today! Sadly, all too often, our actions may impede others from coming to know the Saviour, or our words may stumble another believer. The man of God does neither of these things, but is sensitive in leading others to know God more fully.

Elisha and the blind Syrian soldiers (2 Kings 6:8-23).

Quite a handy thing really, having a man of God on your side! Certainly better than any secret service! Time and again the Syrians had attacked the Israelites only to find that they were ambushed, as the Israelites knew they were coming. So the king of Syria sent men to capture Elisha at Dothan. When the town woke up they found themselves surrounded, with no way of escape. Afraid, Elisha's servant brought the news to his master. The answer that Elisha gives is beautiful, and is just as important today, as it was then. In verse 16 we read, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." Elisha's faith allowed him to see spiritual realities that human eyes could not see. There was no cause to fear! It was the Syrians who were surrounded, not the inhabitants of Dothan! The world today may seem to be a dangerous and unstable place. International conflict, job insecurity, pensions crisis, family breakdown, the list seems endless. As we look at all the problems do we, like the people of Dothan, see only the strength of the enemy, the Devil? Faith would have us open our eyes to the truth that, as Jesus said, "Greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world". As we humbly walk in obedience to God, there is no force on earth that can cause us trouble. We have the resource in God to be victorious in our Christian lives. As Paul could say in

Romans 8:31, "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?" The temptation to give up is never far away. Let us with eyes wide open realise that He is able to keep us, wherever our lives may be.

Now when the Syrian army came to take Elisha, they are struck by blindness. Elisha himself goes out to meet them, and leads them to Samaria. When the king of Israel sees his enemy brought helplessly before him, he looks to kill them all. But Elisha will not hear of it. Food and water is set before them, and then they are sent on their way unharmed. And what do we read: "so the bands of Syrian raiders came no more into the land of Israel". The man of God brings peace. As those who know the God of peace, and who have experienced the peace of God in our own lives, we can be used by God to bring peace into the lives of others. So often when people speak of peace, all they mean is an absence of war, or conflict. But God wants us to experience His peace. This brings us a conscience that is right before God, a readiness to see others prosper, even when we do not, and a calm assurance that no matter what may happen, our God is with us.

Elisha and Hazael (2 Kings 8:7-15).

What? A man of God weeping? Surely one so close to God should be joyful all the time! But here Elisha is upset. Ben-Hadad, the king of Syria, was sick and so he sends Hazael to enquire of Elisha as to whether he was going to recover. Little did the king know that Hazael was to usurp his throne. When he meets Elisha, the man of God is deeply moved as God reveals to him all the evil that is to take place. On his return, Hazael swiftly murders Ben-Hadad and becomes king himself. But Elisha had seen the evil that Hazael would cause to fall upon the Israelites, and it is this that so profoundly upsets him. What a tender heart Elisha had for the people of God! They were a rebellious, idolatrous and fickle people - and Elisha loved them! How much in the Church today we need those with a heart like Elisha. We are brothers and sisters, the people whom Jesus died for, and yet we carp and criticise and hurt one another. Let us make it our goal today to say some encouraging words, on a personal level, to one of our fellow believers. And let us have a heart that is full of concern and care for His people.

Elisha and Joash (2 Kings 13:14-21).

For nearly 55 years Elisha had followed God as the prophet in Israel. Now as an old man, in his late seventies, if not older, he still has a burning desire to want the very best for Israel. Second best was never good enough for Elisha or the people he cared about. Now Elisha was dying. King Joash came to him, unsure as to how Israel can carry on without the presence of this man of God. Perhaps, too, there were fears in the heart of Elisha as to what would happen when he was gone. So he instructs Joash to take a bow and fire his arrow. As Joash does this, Elisha informs the king that he would be victorious over the Syrian enemy. He then tells Joash to strike the ground, which the king does, three times. Elisha becomes angry, "Why have you stopped?" he cries, "you should have done it six times and then you would have completely destroyed the Syrians. Now you will only defeat them three times". Right to the very end of his life, the man of God maintained a burning ambition for the glory of God and the welfare of His people. The force that had guided his whole life still burned brightly within his dying body. His God had not changed, and so neither would Elisha. As we grow older, as we see the inevitable failure of friends, the disappointment of dreams, do we still maintain the same desire for the glory of God? Our God does not change. His Word, His desires are still the same. Let us hold fast to the desire to be here only for the Lord Jesus.

Elisha, the man of God, has so much to teach us. In his bringing freedom from slavery, his confidence in God, his appreciation of the moral worth of the Lord Jesus, his humility, his peacemaking efforts, his big heart for the people of God and in his ambition he was devoted to God. We close this morning by returning to the words of W Phillip Keller. "Elisha exemplifies for us clearly the sort of person for whom God is eternally seeking. He is that responsive individual, open, available, eager to respond positively to the call of God. It is such people who, in the hand of God, become the ones who achieve mighty things in the plans of Christ. There is no debate, no delay. They simply step out to do God's will...now!"

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